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ABSTRACT

The rationale and training procedure used in a three-day communication and leadership project in a junior high school located in a southern metropolitan area of approximately 200,000 population is described. The workshop reflected a commitment to interview developmentally in the desegregation process. Four general workshop goals were formulated; (1) improved skill in communication; (2) improved leadership skills; (3) increased ability to engender helpful interpersonal relations, across both racial and student-teacher role lines, and (4) to both assess the communication systems operating in the school and develop strategies to improve these systems. A questionnaire was constructed and at the conclusion of the workshop, participants were provided an opportunity to evaluate their experiences. Results indicated a very positive response. In summary, it was felt that through such student-teacher involvement significant progress was made toward a goal eloquently stated by one student participant; that of "...making school a cool place to learn." (Author)

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TOWARD MORE EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS: A LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATION TRAINING PROJECT

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The need for open and genuine reciprocal communication between students and teachers is an accepted fact. Counselors are especially sensitive to such communication problems and are frequently called upon to deal with the consequences of poor relations between students and teachers. This may involve difficulties between two individuals and at times it is a function of larger inter-group relations.

Recent years have seen the South's public schools advance toward integration as large numbers of black and white students attended merged elementary and secondary schools for the first time in 1970-71. Faculties and staffs were also substantially desegregated. This rapid transition was accompanied by a number of inherent adjustments. Examples included: the racial composition of cheerleader, majorette and athletic teams; school names, colors, cognomen, and uniforms; qualifications for membership in bands, choral groups, and clubs; the playing of Dixie at athletic and other events; representation in student government associations. Such problems gave rise to special communication needs among both black and white teachers and students. A conspicuous absence of effective student-teacher coalitions was evident in many cases where these difficulties were prolonged.

This report describes the rationale and training procedure used in a three-day communication and leadership project in a junior high school located in a southern metropolitan area of approximately 200,000 population. The workshop was planned and conducted by staff of the Auburn University Department of Counselor Education and staff of both the school system and the junior high school. The workshop reflected a commitment to intervene developmentally in the desegregation process. It is hoped that our experience has stimulus and guidance value for counselors and other school personnel motivated to develop and enhance communications between teachers and students.

PROCEDURES[a]

The workshop was conducted on three consecutive days with approximately five hours of training activity each day. Four general workshop goals were formulated: (1) improved skill in communication, (2) improved leadership skills, (3) increased ability to engender helpful interpersonal relations, across both racial and student-teacher role lines, and (4) to both assess the communication systems operating in the school and develop strategies to improve these systems. It was felt that improvement in these areas by a substantial group of teachers (representing all curriculum areas) and students, both elected and emergent leaders, would provide a rich yield in improving the communication and human relations climate in the school. Participants included eleven teachers and nineteen students. Blacks and whites participated in nearly equal numbers in both categories.

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[a]Limited space allows a partial account of training procedures. A more detailed outline and related references may be obtained by writing the authors.

Key Activities

Facilitative communication. Carkhuff's (1969) facilitative communication model provided the basic philosophy and framework for the project. His work has indicated that significant interpersonal relations may have constructive or deteriorative effects and that the positive or negative consequences of interpersonal communication may be accounted for by a core of facilitative conditions. In the educational social context, this means that those who offer high levels of these conditions have constructive effects on others, while those offering low levels have deteriorative effects.

Training was provided on the three facilitative dimensions of empathy (understanding), respect (caring), and concreteness (specificity of expression). Participants were involved in role playing where they alternately played the role of helpee and helper. In the helper role, they attempted to provide communication that would be considered minimally helpful with respect to the three facilitative dimensions. This experience was augmented by a more experiential, laboratory based procedure. A number of procedures drawn from a T-Group or human relations training approach were employed. Thus, participants attempted to apply the facilitative dimensions of empathy, respect and concreteness in group interaction rather than one-to-one role playing exclusively.

Agree - disagree game. During the first day, areas of poor communication, misunderstanding, and conflict were identified through separate student-teacher discussion groups. The trainers helped groups describe problems in behavioral terms. This activity, conducted along T-Group lines,

yielded material used to construct items for an agree-disagree exercise used with subsequently combined group sessions. Instructions and excerpts from the game follow:

Your task is to agree or disagree with each statement as a group. If your group cannot reach agreement or disagreement, you may change the wording in any statement enough to promote agreement. Complete the task in Thirty minutes.

1. Individuals should be free to do whatever they want provided others are not harmed.
2. Decisions affecting local schools should always be made at the local level.
3. Teenagers and adults equally mistrust each other.
4. Decisions reached through a democratic process are always right.
5. If a group can't agree on an issue, there is something wrong with at least one of its members.
6. When teenagers and adults don't agree on an issue, it is because they don't speak the same language.

This game was played with eight participants with others in an outside circle serving as process observers. The latter were given discreet instructions for noting group dynamics in terms of participation, leadership, roles, decision making, communication, and sensitivity. After the game the process observers reported leading into a participant discussion of their experience.

NASA game. The NASA, or Lost on the Moon (Hall, 1971), game is a decision making exercise which demonstates the effectiveness of group decision making as compared with independent points of view. Developed by social psychologist, Jay Hall, the decision game presents the following situation:

Your spaceship has just crash-landed on the moon. You were scheduled to rendezvous with a mother ship 200 miles away on the lighted surface of the moon, but the rough landing has ruined your ship and destroyed all the equipment on board, except for the 15 items listed below.

Your crew's survival depends on reaching the mother ship, so you must choose the most critical items available for the 200-mile trip. Your task is to rank the 15 items in terms of their importance for survival. Place number one by the most important item, number two by the second most important, and do on through 15, the least important.

The list includes such items as signal flares, two one hundred-pound tanks of oxygen and a box of matches.

Participants first complete the exercise individually. Then in groups of eight they are told to complete the exercise as a group, sharing individual solutions in reaching a consensus on each item. Subsequently, performance on the exercise is scored for the group of eight in two ways; by adding their individual scores and obtaining the mean score and by simply scoring the group consensus results. Almost without exception, the score achieved under conditions of group consensus is superior to the aggregate mean. Frequently, the group score is better than the score of any individual member of the group, an event that has been termed synergy.

The exercise powerfully demonstrates the benefits which accrue when groups use the creativity, intelligence and knowledge of all members.

Processing. Group "processing" following each activity was an important learning experience basic to the total program. This consisted of discussions led by the trainers where an attempt was made to extract from the experience every meaning that it might have for communication and leadership. It was obvious that new and constructive dialogue was developing between students and teachers as well as within the two categories. Perceptions and feelings with racial centrality were common.

EVALUATION AND FOLLOW-UP

A questionnaire was constructed and at the conclusion of the workshop, participants were provided an opportunity to evaluate their

experiences.[b] The results indicated a very positive response. In terms of achieving the workshop goals, the results were favorable. It is especially significant that a majority of both students and faculty indicated a change in perception with respect to how they view working with each other. Both groups seemed to have discovered potentials in the other that they had not earlier recognized. A commitment to continue to explore ways of mutually working toward the resolution of problems in the school was evident to the trainers. Also, it is noteworthy that a group of teachers and students who participated planned and conducted a series of programs similar to the workshop involving a large percentage of students enrolled in the school. In summary, it was felt that through such student-teacher involvement significant progress was made toward a goal eloquently stated by one student participant; that of "...making school a cool place to learn."

REFERENCES

Carkhuff, R. R. Helping and Human Relations: Volume I, Selection and training. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1969.

Hall, Jay. Decisions, decisions, decisions. Psychology today, 5, November, 1971.

[b] Tabular results may be obtained from the authors.